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SUBJ: ISRAEL ENERGIZES ANTI-POLLUTION CAMPAIGN

¶1. (U) Summary: The Israeli government undertook several steps that point towards a new activism on the pollution front in one of the Middle East's most industrialized countries. Although these actions build on earlier studies and legislation, the new measures being implemented and commitments undertaken by the government imply a new decisiveness. Several factors contribute to this change, including commitments to international environmental conventions, increasing public awareness of the country's pollution hotspots, and the growing competition for land use due to population pressure and industrialization. End Summary.

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New Energy on an Old Issue  
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¶2. (U) Recent Israeli government action on a number of fronts points toward a new activism against pollution in one of the Middle East's most industrialized countries. The GOI Ministry for Environmental Protection (MEP) released its 2008 Action Agenda January 15, which in combination with recent actions announced by Infrastructure and Finance Ministries implies a new decisiveness in addressing Israel's pollution problems. The GOI also established a Cabinet-level "Green Tax Committee" to press for change through fiscal incentives.

¶3. (U) One reason government attention has focused on pollution is a report commissioned by the Ministry for Environmental Protection (MEP) about Ramat Hovav, Israel's major toxic waste treatment facility, located south of Beersheva. The report is due to be delivered in February but its conclusions have already been released on the MEP's website. It covers air quality and pollution deriving from both spot sources (smokestacks) and non-spot sources (accidents, wastewater) at both the waste treatment site and the industrial park next to it. Ramat Hovav handles heavy metal, chemical, and industrial waste, and has become a lightning rod for negative public opinion about the GOI's environmental oversight.

¶4. (U) The report particularly grabbed public and parliamentarian attention because the GOI announced last fall that a major new Israel Defense Force (IDF) training base and city will be built nearby. A Dutch environmental consultant helping prepare a report on Ramat Hovav defended government policy, noting that under the GOI program, by 2010 there will not be excessive pollution at the planned military complex. By implication, however, he said that existing pollution levels are beyond acceptable standards. The MEP concedes this, but has gone on the offensive by planning to implement a European Union Directive concerning integrated pollution prevention and control (the IPPC Directive) in Ramat Hovav, and insisting that all operators at Ramat Hovav comply with these maximum reference values for pollutants. The timeframe for full implementation, however, will only be at the end of 2010.

¶5. (U) On January 16, the GOI also released news of a tighter policy on air pollution around Haifa, one of Israel's core industrial

areas. The Director of the MEP Air Quality Division Shuli Nezer stated to Knesset that a study of pollution over Haifa bay revealed the presence of the suspected carcinogens hydrogen chloride, benzene, chloroform, methylene chloride, formaldehyde and trichloroethylene in quantities exceeding acceptable standards. In reaction, the MEP is imposing a plan mandating stringent standards on industrial plants in the area, again in accordance with European IPPC standards.

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Coming to Grips With Climate Change  
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16. (U) The GOI also has reawakened to the reality of climate change. Although Israel became a party to the Convention on Climate Change in 1996, its Kyoto party status was only finalized in March of 2004. While technically not bound by Kyoto protocol commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the GOI is now pressing for OECD membership, which would come with greater Kyoto obligations. In its First National Communication under the UN Convention on Climate Change in November 2000, the GOI said it would target reductions in vehicular traffic, improve the energy efficiency of buildings, and move to lower CO2 emissions from industry and electricity generation.

17. (SBU) Seven years later, the statistics indicate a very mixed result. Israeli data on gas emissions for the last five years show that some airborne pollutants did decrease from 2000 to 2005. Carbon monoxide pollution, mostly from vehicles, decreased by approximately 30 percent, mostly due to the entry of more modern vehicles and stricter licensing inspections. However, the amount of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases has soared as vehicular traffic in Israel has increased. Israeli greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions were

TEL AVIV 00000195 002 OF 003

up by six percent over the period. Much of the GHG increase came from the energy industry, whose emissions increased by 12 percent in the wake of an increased demand, reflecting Israel's improving standard of living. Nor has alternative energy sourced electricity made much progress; despite a declared target of using solar power for five percent of its electricity by 2007, the country's first commercial solar power plant is only now entering the bidding process, delayed by years of bureaucratic logjams over where to locate it.

18. (SBU) In the wake of the Bali Conference on Climate Change in December, the MEP Director of the Air Quality Division Shuli Nezer said the GOI was preparing a major policy change. Although as a 'developing country' Israel has no fixed Kyoto commitments, "we cannot continue as part of the international community with such a trend" Nezer said. After the final report about emissions appears in January, he said the Ministry will examine alternatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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Complying With Maritime Pollution Laws  
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19. (U) The Barcelona Convention is another instance of Israel addressing environmental issues in the framework of its international obligations. GOI Environment Minister Gideon Ezra led the Israeli delegation to Almeria, Spain, January 15-18 for the 15th Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention. The Convention, established under the EU's Mediterranean Action Plan in 1976, now includes 21 riparian states and addresses the environmental health of the Mediterranean. One of the primary objectives of the meeting was to adopt a new Integrated Mediterranean Coastal Area Management Protocol (ICZM Protocol). Israel took a leading role in this process, trying to better integrate its national policy and legislation into the Convention's obligations. Energizing Israel's "Law on the Protection of the Coastal Environment" is the objective; trying to harmonize the ICZM Protocol to the domestic law, and assure that integrated coastal zone management will take place along the entire Mediterranean coast, encompassing both sea and coast. (Integrated management

relates to ecological, economic and land use features which are specific to each region.) Israel hopes that adoption of the ICZM Protocol will spur its efforts to protect both coastline and sea, and also improve management of neighboring countries' coastal and marine environments, thereby reducing adverse external impacts on Israel.

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Sources of the Activism  
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¶10. (U) Several factors contribute to this re-energized anti-pollution policy of the GOI. Visible environmental problems and commitments to international environmental conventions are two factors, but equally important is increasing public awareness of the country's pollution hotspots. Israel's strong economic growth - over 5 percent annually for the past four years, - has led to high consumer demand and a rising standard of living, with the attendant environmental costs. In Israel's densely populated central region, increasing competition for land due to a growing population and high industrialization has pushed people towards land on urban peripheries previously relegated to waste and industrial purposes. The demand for accountability for pollution has grown with public awareness of it. Among other results, this has forced the removal of Tel Aviv's landfill waste operation (not far from Israel's sole international airport) to a more remote location 60 miles south. The 20 million cubic meter mountain of former landfill covering 113 acres is now being converted into parkland to create a greenbelt of parks cutting through the urbanization spreading south from Tel Aviv.

¶11. (SBU) Urban sprawl is also behind the IDF's desire to relocate to a new training base in the south - on land near the Ramat Hovav waste site. Public concern about the health of military personnel and their families put pollution issues on the front pages, and created an odd coalition, drawing together conservative Parliamentarians concerned about IDF readiness and liberal activists for environmental causes. When pressed by the Knesset on how the Environment Ministry will address the problem, MEP Deputy Director General Yosi Inbar acknowledged that the database held by the Ministry today does not allow for exact calculation of expected air quality at the new base site -- although he was confident there would be no danger to servicemen when the base opens in two years.

¶12. (U) Israeli NGOs have also kept environmental issues in the spotlight. The MEP maintains a list of 1000 polluted sites in Israel, places where ground, water and air have been polluted by the energy sector, industry, and the GOI itself - mostly due to IDF operations. There is growing NGO and public demand for accountability and remediation of these sites. On January 15 the

TEL AVIV 00000195 003 OF 003

MEP outlined an ambitious work program for 2008, placing top priority on the hotspots of industrial pollution, such as Ramat Hovav and Haifa harbor. The Ministry also pledged to improve environmental problems in specific venues, such as Bedouin communities in the south and Arab-Israeli areas of the Galilee in the north. (Post contacts claim that Palestinian and Bedouin children have a higher incidence of pediatric blood cancers, and question environmental exposure risks as one cause.) Finally, targeting long-term issues, the Ministry will undertake the studies needed to prepare policies addressing Israel's GHG emissions and industrial waste problems.

¶13. (U) As public awareness of climate change has grown, it too has led to public reconsideration of existing policies. One Israeli professor has called for rethinking Israel's trend towards desalination, relying increasingly on turning seawater into freshwater for national consumption. He advocates greater conservation and recycling, because desalination demands enormous amounts of electric energy -- which in Israel means burning coal and gas, generating even more CO2. Regarding climate change, parliamentarians supporting NGO initiatives have introduced legislation into the Knesset, not waiting for government action. According to the draft Bill, Israel would be legally obligated to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by one-fourth by 2020 in relation to the quantity in the year 2000, thus echoing the obligations of the world's developed countries. The MEP has

indicated it prefers a goal of a 50 percent reduction by 2050 - the objective agreed in Bali.

¶14. (U) In a move hailed as both popular and environmentally friendly, the Ministry of Finance proposed a major reform of the tax structure for vehicles based on pollution. Israel already has a 79 percent sales tax rate on vehicles. Now, for the first time tax rates will be adjusted according to the emissions of the vehicle, in 15 different levels ranging from a 15,000 shekel surtax on highly polluting models to a 6,000 shekel credit on low emission vehicles. The incentive to buy electric cars will be strong, as they will be taxed at 10 percent, versus the 79 percent rate imposed (though adjusted) on all other vehicles. The GOI cabinet "Green Tax Committee" approved this new tax structure on January 13, another sign of the commitment to a government-wide assault on pollution.

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